

Superintendent skills

By Jim Converse



Jim Converse is one of America's leading botanical artists. His paintings and drawings have appeared in numerous national publications, and his weed and grass identification books have become standard tools of the trade. Jim is far more than a botanical artist, however, with years of

practical turf experience. Before assuming turf management responsibilities at OM Scott & Sons Company, more than 20 years ago, he worked as a golf course superintendent. After tours in Scotts Research and Retail Training areas, Jim was transferred to the ProTurf Division where he headed their training and educational programs. He is currently concentrating his talents in the area of visual communications.

Apple green patches

I once heard a superintendent say, "If I ever attend another seminar and hear a speaker start to talk about *Poa annua*, I'll get up and walk out!" As a professional, this is somewhat akin to hearing a physician exclaim that he's heard all he wants to hear about the common cold! Turf maintenance is a very demanding and unforgiving endeavor, but it is far from an exact science. There is always something to learn. And, though many superintendents have uncanny knowledge and skills, most of us would agree that we have never known a "world's foremost authority."

In traveling across this country we hear *Poa annua* referred to as "Poa," "Poey," "Po anna" and in any number of irreverent ways. But, most of us prefer to reduce it to a neat three syllables and say "Po an-ya". With such a "cussed" reputation, it's one of the few grasses that is known more often by its botanical name rather than its common name. So even though Annual Bluegrass does have a nice pleasant sound, it is rather a mouthful. To compound our confusion, *Poa annua* can hardly be called a true annual, because there are many variations. We can all recall the apple green patches that persist and maintain at least some color through the winter and into the following year. This is quite the opposite of a true annual

that completes its life cycle in one growing season.

Many golfers can attest to the fact that their own home lawns are beautiful and that *Poa annua* has never been a problem. Few superintendents would question this reality, but the golfer is seldom aware that his demands for a golfing turf are also the things that favor *Poa annua*. The golfer mows his own lawn at one and one-half to three inches, which may be higher than he expects on the golf course rough. But, he insists that fairways be cut at three-quarters of an inch and greens at no more than one-quarter. *Poa annua* is the one predator that thrives in this situation. To keep the grass growing and pleasingly green under these close mowing conditions, requires proper nutrients and an adequate supply of moisture. For an endless number of reasons "adequate" often becomes excessive and an even more ideal environment is created for the establishment of *Poa annua*.

There are cool, moist and most particularly, coastal areas where the turf on golf courses is almost completely *Poa annua*. It grows amazingly well, doesn't seem to seed prolifically and proves to be well suited for superintendent and golfer. In contrast, there are other courses where *Poa annua* composes only a small percentage of the turf, but presents unbelievable problems. For several weeks in the spring and most often when golfing reaches a fever pitch, a putt on the green can be compared to a putt in the alley. To say that the golfer is annoyed, would be putting it mildly. He's hot and he's mad! There's only one guy to blame — the Superintendent, and he catches it from every direction. Sometimes he lowers the mower in hopes of catching more seed, but mostly he tries to keep a very low profile until the crisis passes. And, as soon as it passes, which it will, he has only to continue the vicious cycle by keeping the apple green patches moist enough through hot weather to stay alive until another season.

Many times we have seen a bright, energetic superintendent walk into a golf course position, with every inten-

tion of using the latest methods to bring the *Poa* problems to its knees. After several years, he too bows to the insurmountable odds that others before him have faced. He throws in the towel and moves on to another course.

Fortunately, there are pre-emergence herbicides that now offer some hope in *Poa annua* control. With judicious use, they can be very effective, especially on newer courses, or where infestations are still in minor stages. But, even under the best of conditions there are no absolute, "sure fire" cures.

As every superintendent and turf student has learned, in any discussion of *Poa annua* sooner or later there comes the admonition about "poor maintenance practices." And in the case of *Poa annua*, "poor maintenance practices" means primarily excessive moisture. It's a "teeth gritting" expression, for the inference is that when *Poa annua* is present "poor maintenance" is the cause and the superintendent is at fault. Other factors are seldom observed, or discussed.

Not all golf courses are equipped with "bionic" watering systems, but most are more than adequate. The superintendent knows that every area of his course is different and must be watered to its best advantage. But, there are peaks and valleys, humps and depressions, areas of compaction or infiltration and many other variables. It's often necessary to apply more water to a hill just to keep it alive, even though it's certain that the run-off is too much for the valley *Poa annua*, or no *Poa annua* in some situations the maintenance options are few.

For the present at least, there seems to be very little evidence that a solid, absolute cure for *Poa annua* is near at hand. In fact, there is some question if this possibility could ever become a reality. On more golf courses *Poa annua* must be continually treated as an unwanted pest. The superintendent's only recourse is to wage a consistent effort toward its eradication by using every known practice at his disposal. His chances for any degree of success can only be increased by learning more about *Poa annua* from every available source.